



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

THE NEGRO IN UNSKILLED LABOR

By R. R. WRIGHT, Jr., Ph.D.,

Editor, *The Christian Recorder*, Philadelphia.

By the term "unskilled labor," as used in this paper, is meant that class of labor which requires the least training of mind and the least skill of hand: that class of labor in which the novice can turn out as large a product as the man of long experience, in which the wage earned the first year is but little different from that earned after many years of service.

Fifty years ago, most of the Negro workers were unskilled laborers on the farms and in the homes of the South. Of the 4,000,000 slaves who were emancipated by Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, there were, approximately, 3,000,000 ten years of age and over, and most of these were engaged in unskilled labor as agricultural workers and domestic servants, general helpers, etc. Very nearly 2,000,000 were workers on the farms of the South, and most of the others were workers in the households of the South. Those were unskilled laborers.

There were, indeed, a few Negroes in the South who were engaged in mechanical pursuits, such as carpenters, bricklayers, blacksmiths, etc., but these constituted only a small percentage. And judged by the standards of today, I am inclined to think that the degree of their skill was far short of that required for successful competition with present day artisans. For example, most of the carpenters of the time could not read and write and built "by guess," rather than from written plans. One has only to examine specimens of their work to become convinced that they, at the very best, rarely reached the average of skill required of mechanics today.

In the North, the 250,000 Negroes were practically all unskilled laborers, with notable exceptions here and there. A census of Negroes in Philadelphia in 1856 disclosed a few hundred who had skilled trades, but the investigator added that "less than two-thirds of those who have trades, follow them. A few of the remainder pursue other avocations from choice, but the greater number are compelled to

abandon their trades on account of the unrelenting prejudice against their color."

The figures for occupations for the census of 1910 have not yet been published. We have therefore to content ourselves with those given out for 1900. In 1900 the census returned Negroes in the following occupations:

NUMBER OF NEGROES, TEN YEARS OF AGE AND OVER, IN THE FIVE MAIN CLASSES OF OCCUPATION

| | Number | Percentage |
|--|-----------|------------|
| Agricultural pursuits..... | 2,143,176 | 53.7 |
| Professional service..... | 47,324 | 1.2 |
| Domestic and personal service..... | 1,324,160 | 33.0 |
| Trade and transportation..... | 209,154 | 5.2 |
| Manufacturing and mechanical pursuits. | 275,149 | 6.9 |

There were 53.7 per cent of the Negroes in agriculture, 33 per cent in domestic and personal service, 6.9 per cent in manufacturing and mechanical pursuits, 5.2 per cent in trade and transportation, and 1.2 per cent in professional service.

Unskilled labor among Negroes is chiefly in agricultural pursuits, domestic and personal service, and trade and transportation.

Of the 2,143,176 Negroes in agricultural pursuits, in 1900, 1,344,139 were agricultural laborers, while 757,828 were farmers. The agricultural laborers, representing the unskilled workers, had, however, decreased from 1,362,713 in 1890, to 1,344,139 in 1900; while the farmers, representing the skilled group, increased from 590,666 in 1890 to 757,828 in 1900. Other unskilled workers returned in 1900 are chiefly noted under the following: lumbermen and raftsmen, 6,222; turpentine farmers and laborers, 20,744; wood choppers, 9,703.

It is to be noted that although the Negro population has increased nearly 150 per cent, during the past 50 years, the agricultural laborers have remained almost the same in number, while the more skilled workers are constantly increasing.

Next to agriculture, comes domestic and personal service which furnished 1,324,160 persons. As in agriculture, so in domestic service, much of the labor is skilled and semi-skilled, though it may be classed as unskilled. There were 11,536 janitors and sextons; 545,980

laborers; 220,105 launderers and laundresses; 465,787 servants and waiters; 9,681 soldiers, sailors and marines; 2,994 watchmen, policemen and firemen, and 6,070 in other branches of domestic and personal service.

In trade and transportation, of the 209,154 Negroes engaged, the following may be said to be unskilled occupations: draymen, hackmen, teamsters, etc., 67,727; hostlers, 14,499; hucksters and peddlers, 3,270; porters and helpers in stores, 28,978; messengers and office boys, 5,077.

In all of these classes of unskilled occupations, the Negroes constitute a much greater percentage than their percentage of the population. In the fifteen unskilled occupations named, there are 2,756,442 Negroes, or nearly 70 per cent of all the Negroes engaged in general occupations. The number of unskilled workers in the race must be at least 75 per cent, or about 3,000,000, about the same number as estimated fifty years ago.

During the past fifty years, however, there have been significant changes in unskilled labor among Negroes, some of which are here enumerated:

1. The race, then largely unskilled, has developed more than a million semi-skilled and skilled workers, business and professional men and women.

2. The standard of the unskilled worker, himself, has been raised.

3. The unskilled worker has adapted himself to a system of wages, as against the system of slavery.

4. The average of intelligence of unskilled labor has been greatly increased.

5. Unskilled labor has become more reliable.

6. Negro labor has survived the competition of the immigrant.

7. The unskilled Negro laborer has migrated largely to the large cities.

8. Unskilled labor, has to a large extent, been the foundation on which Negro businesses, the Negro church, the Negro secret society have grown up.

Out of 3,000,000 unskilled Negro workers who were freed in 1863, and the few thousand unskilled and semi-skilled, who already had their freedom there have developed the various occupations of Negroes we have today. The most notable development is in the emergence of Negro professional men and women, a group of 60,000 or more persons

who follow vocations almost entirely unknown to the Negro race fifty years ago, and to whom is largely entrusted the moral and intellectual, as well as the economic leadership of the group. Next to that comes the development of Negroes in business and in skilled trades, in which the race has built with fair success upon the foundation laid in slavery.

Unskilled labor represents the great mass of Negroes at the close of the war, and in one sense, may be taken to indicate, today, the great mass of Negroes who appear to have stood still in the march of the race's progress. In a truer sense, however, this group of unskilled workers has shared something of the progress of the group. The kind of "unskilled labor" given by the Negro fifty years ago is quite different from that given today. Even as the standard in skilled trades has increased, so has the standard in unskilled labor increased. The Negro domestic servant of today has shown much improvement over the old house servant, and one servant now often does the work of two or three of the older generation. The same is true in the case of labor in various other fields. Indeed, this increase in the efficiency standard has done much to raise the degree of respect given much unskilled work among Negroes, as in the case of waiters in hotels, janitors of large buildings, butlers, stewards and many kinds of "day labor."

But one of the greatest changes has been the adapting of itself to the wages system. Much of the skilled and semi-skilled labor of the South had received wages before the Civil War, but very little of the unskilled labor. Working for regular wages required knowledge of the use of money, planning for expending the same, estimating the value of work and its relation to wages. Today, practically all city Negroes work for wages and the wages system is more and more in vogue upon the farms, to such an extent, at least that we are justified in saying that Negro labor has, during these fifty years, practically changed from a system of slavery to a system of wages.

In fifty years, the Negro worker has decreased in illiteracy from 90 per cent in 1860 to 30.4 in 1910. The preponderance of numbers, then on the side of illiteracy, is now on the side of literacy. Today there are more than 5,000,000 Negroes over 10 years of age who can read and write against 250,000 in 1863. Though there are still 2,200,000 Negroes over 10 years of age who cannot read and write, and who comprise a large part of the unskilled labor of the race, the learning

to read and write has made possible not only better efficiency in kinds of labor which Negroes already had, but also the entrance of new avenues of labor unknown to them before.

Not only in intelligence has there been made progress, but also adaptation to a new condition. In all races, the unskilled laborer is the greatest sufferer, and the hardest to adapt himself. In 1863 the Negro unskilled laborer was freed. Many of the farm laborers have entered the ranks of farm owners who now number more than 250,000, while the unskilled group has gradually become more reliable. In the first years of the period under consideration, there was great alarm with regard to the regularity of work. The newly found freedom meant to many Negroes opportunity for idleness and profligacy. When they did work, it was frequently for a few days in the week, and after pay day many were missing until their money was all or nearly all spent and they were under necessity to work. Vagrancy laws, check systems, credit systems, convict labor, peonage, etc., have not done as much to remedy this as have education and the awakening in these Negroes of new desires and opportunities for enjoyment. While there is a great deal still to be desired, there are now hundreds of thousands of Negroes who receive pay on Saturday night and return to work regularly on Monday morning, working six days in the week.

The Negro has furnished, under a wage system, the bulk of the unskilled labor for the farmers of the South. For the past fifty years, by far the greater portion of the South's greatest product, cotton, has been made by the Negro laborer, while its railroads and streets, its sewers and waterworks have been largely constructed by Negroes. The writer was in his twenty-first year before he had ever seen as many as a dozen white men at one time working on the streets, digging sewers or laying railroads. Born and reared in the black belt of the South, he had only seen Negroes do this work and had come to believe it was their work until a visit to Chicago introduced him to his first large group of white sewer diggers.

At the time the Negro was freed, there came another source of unskilled labor to the country, the foreign immigrant. For nearly fifty years, however, these immigrants made but little impression upon the Negro unskilled laborer of the South.

The Negro has invaded the North, not only as a farm laborer and a domestic servant, but also as a laborer in public works, and hundreds

of miles of sewerage and of streets in our great cities are largely the labor of Negroes. The movement of the city has been led chiefly by the unskilled Negro from the farm as the Negro farm owner and operator had no need to go to the city. The growth of the modern city, by its need for unskilled labor, urged Negroes to crowd within its borders. It allured, for here was work, more steady wages, payable every week or fortnight, better protection of person and property, better schools, more excitement and enjoyment.

Unskilled Negro labor has invaded the Northern cities within the past fifty years, and while it has been with extreme difficulty that the skilled laborer has found a place, the Negro unskilled laborer has been a welcome guest. In nearly every large city, special employment agencies have been opened in order to induce Negro workers from the South to come North, where there is abundant public work to be done, on the streets, sewers, filter plants, subways, railroads, etc. Negro hodcarriers have almost driven whites out of business in some cities, while as teamsters, firemen and street cleaners, they are more and more in demand. In the hotel business, the Negro is in demand in the large cities, as waiter, bellman, etc., while the Negro women are more and more in demand as domestic servants.

The cities having the largest Negro population in 1910 were Washington, New York, New Orleans, Baltimore and Philadelphia. Their Negro population in 1860 and 1890 and 1910 is shown below:

| | 1860 | 1890 | 1910 |
|-------------------|--------|--------|--------|
| Washington..... | 10,985 | 75,572 | 94,446 |
| New York..... | 12,472 | 23,601 | 91,709 |
| New Orleans..... | 24,074 | 64,491 | 89,262 |
| Baltimore..... | 27,898 | 67,104 | 87,749 |
| Philadelphia..... | 22,185 | 39,371 | 84,459 |
| Chicago..... | 955 | 14,271 | 44,103 |

New York has made a greater increase in its Negro population during the past twenty years than any large city and Philadelphia is next. This has been due to the urgency of its call for unskilled labor.

In Philadelphia, of 21,128 males of gainful occupations, in 1900, 13,726 were in domestic and personal service or nearly two-thirds of the whole; more than 7,500 of them were returned as "laborers not speci-

fied." Of the 14,095 female workers, 12,920 or more than 90 per cent were returned as domestic and personal servants; 10,522 being "servants and waitresses." In New York, in 1900, out of 20,395 Negro males, 11,843 were in domestic service and out of the 16,114 females, 14,586 were in domestic service. In Chicago, 8,381 of the 13,005 Negro males in gainful occupations were in domestic service, and 3,998 of the 4,921 females were similarly employed. These three cities are typical of the Negro at work in the large cities of the North.

Next to domestic and personal service, which is chiefly, though not entirely unskilled labor, the Negro of the cities is employed in the unskilled occupations of trade and transportation. Taking Philadelphia, as an example, we find the chief occupations of Negro males, who are employed in trade and transportation, as follows: Draymen, hackmen and teamsters, 1,957; porters and helpers, 921; messengers, errand and office boys, 346; hostlers, 270. These four trades represent more than 70 per cent of the Negroes in trade and transportation, while they represent only 2.7 per cent of the total men of the city in trade and transportation.

It has been the Negro unskilled laborer who has given the heartiest support to the organization which has given an opportunity for the expression of the genius for organization and business within the race. The Negro church is the only Protestant church in America which has kept hold of the common laborer, and it is the largest and strongest organization among Negroes. The Negro secret societies, now strong and powerful, are the result of the coöperation of the Negro laborer. These societies are composed of Negro laborers who have given their heartiest support to all forms of Negro business, and have furnished by their patronage, the foundation upon which the Negro physicians and other professional men have risen.

Women and children make up a large proportion of the unskilled workers among the Negroes. Of the 5,329,292 females reported by the census of 1900 as engaged in gainful occupations, 1,316,872 were Negro women. Negro females represented 34.8 per cent of the female wage earners of the United States, while they were only 11.4 per cent of the total female population. These Negro females were engaged chiefly in domestic service and agriculture. There were 509,687 Negro female agricultural laborers out of a total of 665,791 female agricultural laborers in the country. The Negro women constituted 76 per cent of all female agricultural laborers in the

country. There were 1,285,031 female servants and waitresses in 1900 of whom 345,386 or 27 per cent were Negroes. Negro females numbered 218,228 or 65 per cent of the 335,711 laundresses; 82,443 or 66 per cent of the 124,157 "laborers not specified." More than 40 per cent of all the Negro females of the country over 10 years of age were at work, as against 16 per cent of all the white females.

Of the Negro women at work 376,114 were married or 26 per cent of all the Negro married women, while only 3 per cent of the white married women of the country were at work. Of the married women at work, nearly 90 per cent were engaged as agricultural laborers, servants and waitresses, laundresses, and laborers not specified, the four divisions of the census which comprise most Negro female workers.

Between the ages of 10 and 15 years inclusive, there were 516,276 Negro children at work, 319,057 boys and 197,219 girls, chiefly at unskilled occupations, the chief ones being as follows: 404,255 agricultural laborers, 45,436 "laborers not specified," 43,239 were servants and waiters, a total of 492,930 or 95.5 per cent. From 10 to 15 years of age inclusive, 49.3 per cent of all the Negro boys of the country, and 30.6 per cent of the Negro girls were engaged in gainful occupations, chiefly unskilled, as against 22.5 per cent and 7 per cent for white boys and girls respectively.

The last named item, showing that nearly half of the Negro boys and nearly a third of the Negro girls from 10 to 15 years of age are workers in unskilled occupations, should be compared with the following report from the same census: There were 548,661 Negro boys of the ages of 10 to 14 inclusive. Only 277,846 of these were in school. Of the 1,092,020 Negro children 10 years to 14 years inclusive, only 587,583 or 54 per cent were in school, while 504,437 or 46 per cent were out of school; and only 255,730, or 20 per cent of the total Negro boys of this age period, received six months of schooling. The remaining 866,290 Negro boys and girls 10 to 14 years, 86 per cent of the total of that age period, who got less than six months of schooling, and certainly the 504,437 who got no schooling at all during the census year, make up the great mass of the Negro unskilled laborers whose families in the future must be supported by the work of father, mother and child to the physical, moral and economic detriment of our country.

On the other hand, it has been chiefly the school which is gradually raising the Negro from unskilled to skilled labor, and making even his unskilled service more productive, by enlarging his desires for consumption, increasing his foresight, and in general strengthening his character.